**Angles**
New Perspectives on the Anglophone World

**8 | 2019**
**Neoliberalism in the Anglophone World**

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**Amelie Dochy**

**Electronic version**
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/angles/678
DOI: 10.4000/angles.678
ISSN: 2274-2042

**Publisher**
Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur

**Electronic reference**
Amelie Dochy, « Commemorating the Irish Diaspora in the USA: The Role of 19th-century Paintings », *Angles* [Online], 8 | 2019, Online since 01 April 2019, connection on 28 July 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/angles/678 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.678

# Commemorating the Irish Diaspora in the USA: The Role of 19th-century Paintings

Amelie Dochy

1 Between 1845 and 1852, at the time of the Great Famine, the Irish boarded ships for America by the thousands, a record number being reached in 1851, when 250,000 migrants including men, women and children left Ireland for the United States (Gray 100). Some left from the South coast of Ireland, from the port of Cork, and others went to Liverpool to start a long journey of 40 days at sea to reach America, especially during the winter of 1846-1847 and in 1848-9 (Gray 99-100). Transport was sometimes financed by landlords who were anxious to get rid of the famished tenants living on their lands,[1] but more migrants were helped by relatives abroad, who gave them money to pay for the journey: in 1849, £500,000 were sent to Ireland to facilitate the emigration of complete families, or sometimes of entire villages (Gray 100). For them, the cheapest means of transport was offered by Canadian merchants, who shipped wood to Liverpool and who sold tickets to emigrants instead of returning with empty holds.[2] The surviving passengers received medical assistance in Grosse Isle, where they were quarantined, before being free to head for the United States.[3]

2 As a result, in 1850, 26% of New York's population was born in Ireland (Chassaigne), a proportion which accounts for the importance of the Irish community in the development of that city, and also of the country as a whole. Once in America, most Irish men and women took menial jobs, worked hard and strove to be assimilated into the general population. As noted by Peter Gray, their efforts were often rewarded, especially after several generations. Towards 1900, only 15% of the members of the Irish community had unskilled jobs. In the 1920s, they were represented in every sphere of American life and, by the 1960s, many Irish families counted among the wealthiest in the USA (Gray 109, 114-5). The best example of integration is probably that of John F. Kennedy, who became president of the United States in 1960 and whose great-grandfather had left County Wexford in 1848.[4]

3 Like Kennedy, many Irishmen in the USA were and are still proud of their Irish heritage which is commemorated through various events such as the Saint Patrick's Parade, which takes place in New York City every year. Such commemorations are moments when people remember the past, in order to revive a memory that is important for a group, a family or a nation. Roisín Higgins has showed that there is an official form of commemoration, organised by the State, which can often be equated with "an exercise in control and communication" about the country's history (Higgins 2007: 34). She also mentions "alternatives to the official commemoration" which are less visible but no less important, and which are embodied in cultural performances or family acts to pay tribute to a person or an event (Higgins 2012: 3).

4 Whether official or not, Higgins argues that "the acts of remembrance project a distinctive self-awareness," highlighting the links between the issues of commemoration and national identity (Higgins 2007: 12). In this context, painting is likely to renew in the mind of the viewer a sense of belonging to a community, especially if the canvas depicts the land of his or her ancestors. This may explain why 19th-century pictures representing Ireland became particularly popular in the United States in the period following the Great Famine to the end of the 20th century, as can be seen through the extravagant prices offered by Americans for such artworks. They comprise paintings from Irish artists working in Ireland, such as James Brenan (1837-1907), Irish artists working for an international audience throughout the United Kingdom or Europe, as was the case of Nathaniel Hone (1831-1917) or Walter Frederick Osborne (1859-1903), and also foreign painters who were not born in Ireland but who depicted the country and its inhabitants in a manner which was deemed "authentic" by viewers.

5 In this article, we will see how these collectors fostered a private form of remembrance complementing official celebrations in the construction of collective memory. This analysis will show why 19th-century paintings regarded as "authentic" are central to the commemoration of Irish immigration in the USA, thus requiring a discussion on the nature and qualities of such artworks, which tend to romanticise the Irish national identity. Finally, this article will explore the reasons why paintings leading to a recreation of the past are adapted to a private, as well as a public commemoration of the Irish diaspora.

## I. Painting as an authentic form of art

6 At the time of the Great Famine, photography was not widespread, as its use only started in 1825 in the UK. As a consequence, the main representations which could be found of immigration were published in newspapers in the form of engravings, or were exhibited in galleries where fine art could be seen. Artists were perceived as reliable witnesses, because some of them had witnessed the famine and emigration themselves.

7 The painters who addressed the painful ordeal of exile from Ireland were however rare. Among them was the Scottish artist Erskine Nicol (1825-1904), who lived in Ireland between 1846 and 1850, and whose depictions of Ireland became popular in America as early as the 1880s-1890s. Nicol's artworks echoed the political and social tensions of the time—such as the poverty of Irish peasants who did not possess the land they cultivated, the lower social status in which Catholics were held by the Protestant oligarchy or the struggle for Home Rule—, but he never openly delved into politics,

thus ensuring he would not lose the admiration of his public. He was also a clever businessman: at the beginning of his career, he developed an easily marketable artistic style marked by the main characteristics of genre painting, which was much praised during his lifetime. For Julia Thomas, genre painting was a multi-faceted school of art:

> 'Narrative painting' is, after all, an umbrella term for what the Victorians called 'scenes from everyday life', 'literary', 'genre', 'historical genre', 'anecdotal', 'domestic', or 'subject' pictures [...] to describe images that told stories. (Thomas 4)

8 19th-century collectors were fond of paintings endowed with literary qualities. In April 1891, the newspaper *The Scotsman* described the dispute between two art dealers who were both willing to buy Nicol's oil painting, *Waiting at the Crossroads* (1868):

> *The Crossroads*, by Erskine Nicol, A. R. A, a fine work, which after a sharp competition was secured by Mr Arthur Tooth for 390 gs., the under bidder being Mr. Carmer, a well-known New York dealer. (13 April 1891: 3).

9 The price of 8,190 shillings (or a little over £409) paid by the London merchant defeated the American competitor, as it was a hefty sum: people could live during a whole year on £150 at the time (Draznin 4).

Figure : Erskine Nicol, *Waiting at the Crossroads*, oil painting, 71 x 105 cm, 1868.


Reproduced with the kind permission of the Frick Library, New York[5]

10 That there was a potential market for *Waiting at the Crossroads* on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean was plain to see. The painting is redolent of many Irish grievances against the English that the migrants settled in America were not prepared to forget. The well-heeled man in the centre of the painting stands out from the other characters by his posture and attitude, something which did not escape the attention of the art critics of the time, who identified him as "unmistakably English." ("Royal Scottish Academy's Exhibition; First Notice." *The Scotsman*, 18 February 1869, 6).

11 Such a reception can be explained by the understanding of the Famine as a consequence of colonisation, an interpretation which was deeply-ingrained among the Irish who settled in America in the middle of the 19th century:

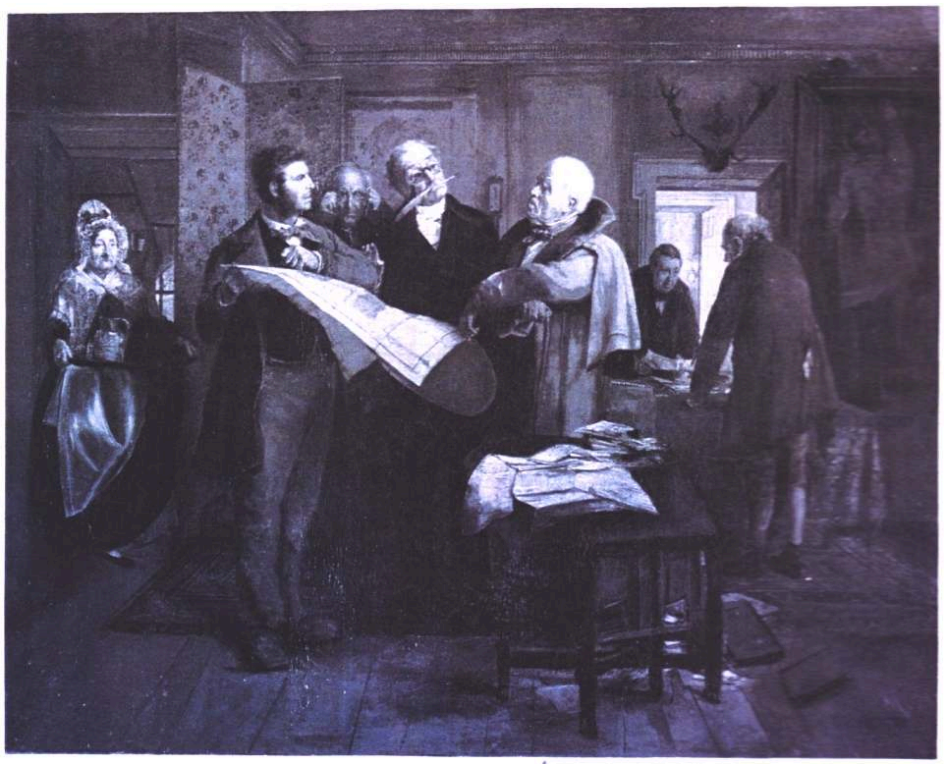
> From 1846, particularly, as the escalation of hunger and disease rendered passage on vessels [...] the sole hope of survival, the predominantly Catholic Irish floodtide transported a 'forced exile' motif enshrining perceptions of British administrators and landowners as orchestrators of Irish devastation across the Atlantic. (Kelly 4)

12 The "forced exile" motif involved a sense of British or English domination, oppression, injustice, a category more general as a basis of Irish nationalism than "colonisation." According to Mary Kelly, authors of that period conveyed a similar message in the USA: "impressions of national calamity exacerbated by inadequate government response and mass evacuation mesmerised mid-nineteenth-century travellers." (Kelly 3)

13 The bad reputation of the British administration in Ireland accounts for the interpretation given to the haughty customer who is waiting for his coach. He is indeed not Irish: the painter suggests that he has come to Ireland to hunt, as can be guessed from the birds tied by his gamekeeper. The young man is seated at his feet, on the left, and behind him stands an old beggar, extending her hand. To the right is seated an Irish piper, so that the triangular composition expresses the domination of the Englishman over the Irish characters, who all depend on the money of this foreigner. Such a situation echoed the social order of Ireland's predominantly rural economy, where land was owned by a class of often absentee landlords who seldom cared about those who worked and lived on it.

14 It is for these reasons that many emigrants left Ireland for America, facing separation from family and friends, a difficulty also represented by the couple parting on the left-hand side of the painting: the man holds the hand of his beloved as she bows her head in grief. Other paintings by Nicol reflected a similar uneasiness about social injustice in Ireland, such as *A Disputed Boundary* (1865-9?) which evokes problems of land division.

Figure 2: Erskine Nicol, *A Disputed Boundary*, oil painting, 137 x 183 cm, 1865/9.



Reproduced with the kind permission of the Frick Library, New York.

15 In the centre of the painting, a lawyer with a pen in his mouth tries to calm down the two opponents, most likely two tenants claiming the same plot. Both are dressed up to the nines, as was customary whenever a visit was paid to any representative of the landowner. Nicol, as a 19th-century artist tended to "dress up" or embellish the figures represented to give a picture of "acceptable" poverty or a non-shocking, sentimental presentation of the motif. He had already adopted a similar perspective in *The Renewal of the Lease Refused* (1868), in which a dignified Irish peasant stands to the left of the picture, before the same screen as that which appears here, covered in tapestry in the left background. Both compositions also include secondary characters coming through the open door on the left-hand side of the picture and the clerk who is here standing on a stool and rummaging through a wardrobe in the right background is exactly the same as that portrayed in *Signing the New Lease* (c. 1868), except that in this other picture, he is depicted in profile and is the one holding a quill in his mouth. All these pictorial indications confirm that the dispute is indeed in an Irish social context.

16 Such quarrels between tenants were frequent in the 19th century as more division of the land could occur whenever a lease was renewed or renegotiated; this was likely to generate conflict (Morehouse 580). In addition, tenants who held an acre or less had troubles feeding a whole family with such small plots, another reason for the emigration of peasants to America. *A Disputed Boundary* struck a chord and it was bought in 1880 by A. T. Stewart, a New York collector and art dealer, who paid $10,000 for it according to *The New York Times* (12 April 1876, 8).

17 19th-century painters like Nicol had directly witnessed rural poverty in Ireland and the causes for emigration, so that their works were deemed "authentic" by art collectors who wanted to commemorate emigration. Authenticity of an artwork, according to

Walter Benjamin, is associated with one place and one time: "The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity." (Benjamin 21) Thus, an "authentic artwork" is necessarily associated with a period in time and a geographical location. Benjamin's theory, expressed in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, can be usefully applied to genre painting. Going further, it could be said that an authentic painting is an artwork painted at the time of what it depicts, on the spot, so that the picture creates a link between past and present, between viewers and the event that they might wish to commemorate.

18 As noted by Lionel Trilling, in his book on sincerity and authenticity, "now that art is no longer required to please, it is expected to provide the spiritual substance of life." (Trilling 98) The element of spirituality belongs to an authentic work of art because it is also one which is likely to trigger an emotional response such as sympathy and understanding of one another's predicaments. And even though Nicol's painting complies with the artistic conventions of his time, it conveys to the viewer this "sentiment of being" that can only be derived from an artwork giving meaning to life and history. Trilling writes:

> Through the nineteenth century, art has as one of its chief intentions to induce in the audience the sentiment of being, to recruit the primitive strength that a highly developed culture has diminished. To this end it proposes a variety of spiritual exercises, among which are suffering and despair and cosmic defiance; conscious sympathy with the being of others; comprehension of the processes of society; social alienation. (Trilling 99)

19 The scene depicted by Nicol participates in this "comprehension of the processes of society" and of "social alienation" in the rural world of 19th-century Ireland. When the troublesome situation represented in the painting illustrates the past of a first-generation or second-generation Irish-American, it is even more touching for the observer. Whenever an art collector buys an authentic painting, it is an act of self-discovery. The buyer reveals his own emotions towards the representation and as a consequence, he is true to himself and he expresses his sincerity or, as Trilling would put it, his own "authenticity" (Trilling 134). Possessing a painting representing Ireland and produced on the spot is insisting on one's *own* authentic identity.

20 For example, Brian P. Burns is a successful American businessman of Irish origin who is the chairman of BF Enterprise, a company based in San Francisco and involved in real estate. According to Adele Dalsimer and Vera Kreilkamp, he has gathered more than 50 Irish paintings (Dalsimer I) and, although most of his artworks are in his home, he regularly sends them to public exhibitions, as we shall see below. Burns claimed that he invested in Irish art to preserve the memory of his Irish heritage and when he started his collection in the 1960s (Dalsimer II), he first wanted to do so by way of 19th-century paintings: "In the early days I was interested in finding pieces that related to the Famine and the hard times in Ireland." (Dalsimer 5)

## II. Romanticised Representations of Irishness

21 Such paintings seldom depict the physical sufferings of the migrants, however: they were less realistic than their engraved counterparts which foregrounded the skeletal bodies of the peasants deprived of their staple food, the potato (Morehouse 579). One of the most striking and sadly emblematic examples, *Bridget O'Donnell and her two children*, was published in December 1849 in *The Illustrated London News*. Made by the Cork-born

artist James Mahoney (1810-1879), the engraving reveals the decay of the malnourished body, a plight which is even more shocking in the depiction of children.

Figure 3: James Mahoney, *Bridget O'Donnell and her two children*, in *The Illustrated London* News, 22 December 1849 (p. 404).

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Irish_potato_famine_Bridget_O%27Donnel.jpg

22 The thinness of their legs, their hollow cheeks and their rags can only move the viewer, especially as such a picture was closer to the reality of Irish emigrants than Nicol's paintings: engravings did not sublimate or romanticise the terrible deprivation of Irish peasants. Their goal was to report the ongoing hardships endured in Ireland, and these upsetting illustrations were not made to be exhibited in galleries. Their context was that of newspapers and Mahoney had received a commission to produce them to accompany the textual accounts that he himself wrote at the request of *The Illustrated London News* which often expressed "sympathy for the plight of the people living in tiny cabins" (Murray 231, 233).

23 Yet, these realistic representations proved less popular in the celebration of the Irish heritage of some Americans, even if these engravings have become, according to Emily Mark-Fitzgerald, "the iconic visual images of the famine" (Mark-Fitzgerald 2010: 184), given that they describe the bodies of famished migrants with greater accuracy and are thus akin to the construction of an "*effet du réel*" or "reality effect," as defined by Roland Barthes (88). However, such engravings were not considered as "more authentic" by those who wished to commemorate their Irishness. This impression may result from the fact that they trigger feelings of compassion, but do not arouse a *pride* in Irish ancestry. Instead, they associate Irishness with deprivation and dependence. As such, they do not call attention to an acceptable image or type of Irish poverty and suffering. Contrariwise, oils on canvas are less stark than Mahoney's engraved images.

Given their pictorial idealisation of Irish characters, canvasses tend to enhance how brave peasants made the difficult decision to emigrate in order to escape grinding poverty. The sadness and grief which they elicit is thus compensated by the hope for a better future. This, according to Higgins, is the essential constituent of commemoration, noting the importance given to optimistic representations of Irishness during the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising:

> What was placed on view during the jubilee was not an introspective preoccupation with the past, but rather a keen desire to project outward a more positive view of Ireland and its future. (Higgins 2007: 12)

24 It is true that Mahoney's engravings are also harder to contemplate because of the distress that they convey, and even Brian P. Burns recognises that some 19th-century artworks dealing with the Famine are rather "dour" (Dalsimer V). It seems that an excess of gloom must be avoided in the commemoration of Irish ancestry: one wants to remember but not to suffer.[6]

25 The paintings which represent Ireland in a so-called "authentic" manner are thus not necessarily those which insist on the awful reality but rather those which are kinder to the feelings of the artist and the viewer. Many American collectors were attracted by representations of the correspondence between those who emigrated and those who stayed in Ireland, as in two paintings by James Brenan, *Letter from America* (1875) and *The Village Scribe* (1881). The latter, which was in the collection of Brian P. Burns, shows a woman and her husband dictating a letter to a scribe who, at that time, was usually a schoolmaster (Dalsimer 88). In this case, the scene clearly sublimates the pain of emigration: the possibility of communication with the relative abroad seems to ease the pain of his or her absence.

Figure 4: James Brenan, *The Village Scribe,* oil on canvas, 29 x 24 cm, 1881, Collection of Brian P. Burns.

Public domain image: http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/irish-artists/james-brenan.htm

26 It is interesting to note that Burns selected this canvas to express his Irish heritage. The Irish context is easily recognisable: the way the woman is dressed indicates that she is an Irish peasant, and that she and her husband should come to visit a scribe was not a rare aspect of rural life—most peasants were illiterate in 19th-century Ireland. This corresponded to the common pictorial representations of the poor, the evolution of which has been studied by John Barrell:

> The effort is always to claim that the rural poor are as contented, the rural society as harmonious, as it is possible to claim them to be, in the face of an increasing awareness that all was not as well as it must have been in Arcadia. The jolly imagery of Merry England, which replaced the frankly artificial imagery of classical Pastoral, was in turn replaced when it had to be by the image of a cheerful, sober, domestic peasantry, more industrious than before; this gave way in turn to a picturesque image of the poor [...]. (Barrell 16)

27 This quotation, which discusses English art, suggests that the representations of Ireland or Irish peasantry had to adopt the general conventions of the acceptable pictorial representation of peasantry in general. Indeed, this habit of showing happy peasants in painting accounts for the peaceful atmosphere in Brenan's canvas. Here, the characters express no anger; they seem to accept emigration without too much grief. However, Brenan was "unusually concerned with the plight of the rural poor" (Kinmonth 162): in other pictures, he presented more painful situations, as in *The Finishing Touch* (1876), which shows the heartbreaking departure of a girl bidding good-bye to her family before emigrating. On the contrary, *The Village Scribe* shows a brighter side of emigration and the continuing relationships between family members. This vision

confirms that painters had to find "a consensus between the concerns of an aristocratic and a bourgeois public" who were fond of such representations of rural life (Barrell 13).

28 Moreover, the setting in a cottage, with its simple furniture and a flagstone floor, also connote Irishness, demonstrating that such narrative representations have become acceptable emblems of Irish national identity.[7] If such a representation seems traditional, this is precisely because it has been made as a fashionable and suitable reconstruction of the past. As was demonstrated by Stephen Pricket in *Modernity and the Reinvention of Tradition* (2013), Victorians used the concept of "tradition" to give legitimacy to various principles regarding religion, culture or art. Thus, a 19th-century painting becomes a privileged object of commemoration when it reconstructs a traditional picture of Irishness for an American viewer, especially when his ancestors were Catholics who had emigrated during the Famine.[8]

29 This explains why collectors like Burns are fond of pictures of horses, such as *Knight of Tara* (1843), painted by Irish artist George Nairn (1799-1850). The painting attracted Burns because he likes horses himself (especially horse races), but also because the animal stands for the Irishman's fabled love for horses, a fondness regularly associated with Irish national identity. This association results from the fact that there is not one but a host of Irish horse breeds, such as the Connemara pony, the Kerry Bog Pony, the Irish Cob, the Irish Draught Horse or the Irish Sport Horse. The latter was associated with the gentry or aristocracy and therefore with the lifestyle of the landlord class, but other breeds, in particular the Connemara Pony, the resistant Kerry Bog Pony or the versatile Irish Draught Horse, were used to carry heavy loads or to work on small farms. Despite there being a degree of sublimation and sentimentalisation in the process associating Irish culture with horses, the fact remains that Ireland has a long history of horse breeding, riding and racing which is a positive and gratifying aspect of Irishness to be displayed with pride in America by descendants of Irish migrants.[9] Another American art collector, John Quinn (1870-1924), whose grandparents had left Ireland and County Limerick in 1851 to settle in Tiffin (Ohio), also owned several representations of Irish horses in his gallery, such as *Washing the Circus Horses*, which had been bought directly from Irish artist Jack B. Yeats (1871-1957). The watercolour was described as a "characteristic scene in the west of Ireland, vigorously drawn in crayon, portraying an ostler mounted on a gray horse and leading others through a picturesque village."[10]

30 Rural dwellings, seascapes and landscapes imbued with pastoral charm are thus often found in the galleries of American collectors—paintings which convey a nostalgia for the land of their ancestors. For James P. Byrne, one must acknowledge "the crucial role nostalgia plays in the construction of a viable [...] Irish-American identity" (Byrne 52). He argues that:

> [Irish-Americans] nostalgically reconstructed Ireland as mythological homeland, 'a simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present'. (Byrne 53-4)

31 Nostalgia means both "return" (from the Greek *nostos*) and "pain" (*algos*). This longing for home can be seen as a feature of the Irish diaspora in America. Byrne claims that "one of the central, recurring characteristics of a diasporic people [...] is the dream of a return to the homeland," (Byrne 58) a desire which is fuelled by depictions of idyllic landscapes, that will then stimulate an imagined image of Ireland in America, fuelling a

process of re-construction and imagination in the Irish-Americans' commemoration of their origins.

32 In Quinn's collection one finds many depictions of the countryside by Irish artist Nathaniel Hone (1831-1917), such as *Glenmalure, County Wicklow*, described as

> a misty view of mountainous country, under a romantic blue sky, flecked with cirrus clouds. In the middle distance rising pasture lands of russet-brown tones, and cattle with their shepherd cloaked by a beam of sunlight. (American Art Association 97).

33 This type of landscape distanced itself from the harsh reality of peasants, focusing instead on the beauty of the Irish scenery.

Figure 5: William McEvoy, Glengariff from the Kenmare Road, Evening (1862), 71 x 132 cm.

Source: http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/living-legacy-irish-art-collection-brian-p-burns-l18318/lot.37.html

34 Similarly, William McEvoy's work, *Glengariff from the Kenmare Road, Evening* (1862, 71 x 132 cm), an oil on canvas which was in the collection of Brian P. Burns, illustrates the sublime scenery of the region: the foreground is plunged into darkness, while the mountains in the background are bathed in the golden light of the sunset. As noted by Catherine Marshall, the quiet atmosphere of the canvas does not allow the viewer to imagine "the plight of the Beare Peninsula that was separated from the rest of the country by the Kenmare-Glengariff road [...] during the Great Famine, just over a decade earlier." (Dalsimer 72) McEvoy's painting celebrates the beauty of Glengariff, which attracted 19th-century tourists who were looking for a picturesque destination. Here, Ireland is associated with the peaceful rhythm of rural life, a cliché which still attracts tourists from around the world.

## III. Paintings and the Recreation of the Past

35 Coming from the Greek root *stereos*, meaning solid, and *type*, referring to a printed image, stereotypes are representations of peoples which are simplistic and generalising. Walter Lippmann (1922) was the first to use this word in this way to refer to the mental images formed after reality has been perceived by your senses and your reason (Schadron). Such a definition reflects the daily work of a 19th-century genre

painter, who illustrated on a canvas his own impression of reality, often combining it with preconceived ideas about nationalities. Commemorative artworks are no exceptions to the rule and, generally, commemoration is even adapted to stereotypes or conventions. As noted by Pierre Nora in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, commemoration draws on stereotypical images:

> La mémoire s'adapte aux conventions (aux usages, aux coutumes, aux valeurs, aux stéréotypes) du groupe qui construit cette mémoire. Les gens commencent à oublier et à inclure des choses et ces transformations permettent que ce dont on se souvient soit cohérent par rapport aux stéréotypes et aux valeurs locales. (Nora 997, quoted by Morisson 145)

36 Commemoration is a transformation: it is a social construct which recreates the past, based on documents which are considered as emblems of the past, notably artworks. What is deemed memorable is often represented by artists, while what is considered shameful can be willingly erased from a country's iconography. As pointed out by Tzvetan Todorov (22-4), the commemorative function of paintings shows that they can glorify as well as obscure historical events.[11]

37 This is why artworks are sometimes commissioned to prevent particular events from falling into oblivion, such as several sculptures financed by the Irish government in the 1990s to mark the 150th anniversary of the Famine (Morisson 137; Mark-Fitzgerald 2010: 181). In this case, the production of the artwork itself is determined by its commemorative function, so that it can be interpreted as an example of artistic reconstruction dictated by a body which wants to include the work in a public debate. It echoes David Lloyd's theory according to which history is always written by the ideological group in a position of cultural hegemony and, as a result, tends to create a homogeneous national narrative (Lloyd 23-7). The motivations for public commemoration are also based on a desire to reinforce national unity, hence the homogeneity of the historical account, because out of this unifying story can emerge a shared identity. Public commemoration participates in the construction of national identities inasmuch as it enhances the links between the members of what Benedict Anderson called an "imagined community."[12]

38 In such circumstances, there can be a significant gap between the creation of the artwork and the period represented in the artwork's specific motif, especially when it is produced more than a century later, which leaves room for a greater degree of interpretation and politically-involved recreation of the past. Valérie Morisson explains:

> Public, le monument doit illustrer l'histoire de manière explicite et être compris par tous car il est un hommage rendu au nom de la population dans sa totalité. Les artistes tendent ainsi à suivre une iconographie établie. (Morisson 142)

39 This is different from individual artistic creations resulting from first-hand experience of the Famine, in which painters were free to express their own feelings and impressions. When there is no public dimension, buyers selecting such artworks for their commemorative function put forward their own vision of the past. Exhibited in a private vault, it can be shared with others and even be transmitted. For a collector like Brian P. Burns, this is a source of motivation to buy and restore Irish paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries:

> Many of the pieces we have bought have required some work. But I am very happy about this. I feel that in restoring the work we are making an investment in the heritage of Ireland. Taking the time to have a work repaired will ensure that it will

> be saved for another generation. I really believe that this is the work that the Irish diaspora can accomplish. We are returning something to the Irish culture that nourished us and sustained our people. What better gift can we bring? (Dalsimer II)

40 For Burns, 19th-century paintings evoking Irish emigration are to be handed on to future generations in order to commemorate Irish descent. Such paintings are therefore appropriate for a private form of remembrance, involving the members of a family, benefitting from a dedicated space, like a gallery in their house, in which these pictures can be exhibited.

41 Paintings can also be contemplated by several people at the same time (for instance on a day of remembrance, such as March 17th, Saint Patrick's Day), triggering a collective reaction which is part and parcel of commemoration. To favour this act of remembrance, private collectors are often willing to share their artistic treasures with the public. This is the case of Brian P. Burns, who lent his Irish collection to the Boston College Museum of Art (from January to May 1996) and then to the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin (from June to August 1996) during an exhibition called "America's Eye: Irish Paintings from the Collection of Brian P. Burns." Similarly, American collectors of the 19th century agreed to make their Irish paintings available to the public, like Franklin O'Day, in Saint Louis, whose Irish roots can be guessed from his name, and who lent Erskine Nicol's canvas *Paying the Rent* (1866) for the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, an international event organised in 1876 (United States Centennial Commission 38).[13]

Figure 6: Erskine Nicol, *Paying the* Rent, oil on canvas, 122 x 166 cm, 1866, private collection, USA.



42 As a result, 19th-century paintings are adapted to a *private* form of commemoration, one implying a personal and intimate version of Irish history; but such family narratives can also support *public* commemoration, especially when art collectors lend their paintings to public galleries staging exhibitions to remember the past. Both the artwork and the collector thus participate in the Irish-American effort to bring the

causes of migration to light. As noted by Pierre Nora, the recreation involved in commemoration is generally collective because it is shared by a great number of people who are willing to remember the past and fuel its memory, each contributing to the building of a part of it by giving meaning to pictorial symbols.

43 Indeed, such paintings embody visual symbols of Irishness and, according to Athena S. Leoussi, this is characteristic of "national art," which

> manage[s] to capture and symbolise the way of life of the so-called 'masses', the historico-cultural community [...] [and this] aesthetic transformation of the ethno-cultural experience into image has contributed, not only to the *prise de conscience* of this experience by its participants, but also to its celebration. (Leoussi 144)

44 National art is appropriate to the commemoration of a past event that has shaped the identity of a community. For Leoussi, "the folk, peasant community, was understood to be, not only a natural source of morality, but also the carrier and repository of the authentic character of a people." (Leoussi 151) Painters focusing on the peasantry thus offer a dignifying and "authentic" vision of Irish character worth remembering.

45 The combined elements of this collective construction are then easily shared when they are conveyed by paintings, which is why they are privileged objects in commemoration or, to use the words of Valérie Morisson, why they "play a crucial role" in the stimulation of collective memory in the face of "traumatic events" (Morisson 145). The Great Famine can be interpreted as such a traumatic episode in Irish history, and paintings are thus helpful means of expression through which to get over such trauma. Yet, a century after the Famine, there was an obvious absence of commemoration in Ireland:

> the failure of the 1940s generation to foreground the Famine anniversary was increasingly characterized as 'silence', 'repression', or 'amnesia' in the wake of a profoundly traumatic cultural memory. (Mark-Fitzgerald 2013: 61)

46 Contrary to what had happened in 1945, the 150th anniversary of the Famine in the 1990s generated a "surge of interest in Famine History and memory" as noted by Emily Mark-Fitzgerald (2005: 184), and this renewed attention was echoed on the other side of the Atlantic by Irish-Americans who, like Brian P. Burns, took the commemoration of the Famine as a chance to reassert their Irish heritage. It is not surprising that as an art collector Burns lent his collection to the Boston Museum of Art in 1996, when commemoration of the Famine was centre stage, both in Ireland and in the United States (Mark-Fitzgerald 2013: 60). According to Mary Kelly,

> exhuming the horrors of hunger and exile required the safety net of time and distance, and it was only at the point when its negative associations could no longer undermine Irish-American progress that the episode's legacy was openly confronted. (Kelly XVIII).

47 Commemoration includes the individual affection for art objects which trigger feelings of belonging, allowing the collector to connect to his or her family history. It also refers to the simplification of history which occurs whenever a national representation is called on to celebrate an event. There is no necessary contradiction between these two aspects: by allowing an individual to feel part of a diasporic community, 19th-century paintings also enhance a sense of national attachment. Thus, 19th-century paintings collected by Irish-Americans nourish the collective memory and reconstruct history, inasmuch as they consolidate the unifying dimension that is a characteristic of national representations. This is why such private forms of remembrance have complemented official celebrations in the construction of a diasporic memory.

48 A painting dating back to the 19th-century and representing Ireland thus functions like a metonymy: it is part *of* the past, having been made by a painter who witnessed Irish emigration, and it stands *for* the past, because it suggests so much more to the observer: beyond the sense of national belonging, it is a means of enabling the viewer not to forget his or her origins, and to express a nostalgia for an imagined rural mode of existence. Ireland is often depicted as a garden of Eden from which Irish peasants were chased away because of land mismanagement. 19th-century paintings are helpful in conveying and sustaining this inspiring narrative accounting for displacement, especially in America, where tens of thousands of Irishmen, women and children found a place to live, and fuelled the memory of their Irish ancestry for future generations of Irish-Americans.

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## NOTES

**1.** Tyler Anbinder mentions the marquis of Lansdowne, who lived in England (in Bowood) but who possessed 95,000 acres in various parts of West Kerry and whose estate agent, William

Trench, organised the emigration of 1,700 tenants to America between December 1850 and March 1851. Thus, a boat departed from Cork every week, with about 200 passengers on board, who could choose to land in New York, Boston, New Orleans or Quebec (Anbinder 352, 357, 365).

**2.** The boats were not adapted for the transport of travellers, earning the notorious name of "coffin ships." For example, *The Virginius* departed from Liverpool in May 1847 with 476 passengers on board, of whom 158 died during the journey, while 106 had contracted typhus before reaching Quebec (Chassaigne). However, in the 1850s, legislation was introduced to remedy the worst excesses of such transport, significantly decreasing the death rate of migrants travelling to America.

**3.** Similarly, in New York, boats carrying migrants were quarantined in Staten Island (Gray 109).

**4.** The family farm was located near New Ross (Salamone 418-9).

**5.** I would like to thank Suz Massen and Elizabeth Lane, who both work at the Frick Library in New York, for their generous help in my research about Erskine Nicol's paintings entitled *Waiting at the Crossroads* and *A Disputed Boundary*.

**6.** This was already true for nineteenth-century art collectors, as was underlined by Julian Treuherz: "though [the viewers] wanted to be touched, they did not want to be pained." (Quoted by Mark Fitzgerald 2005: 187).

**7.** Nelson Goodman writes: "The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance necessary for reference, almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents—like a passage that describes—an object refers to, and, more particularly, denotes it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance." (Goodman 5)

**8.** Protestants from Ireland came to the US at the beginning of the 18th century, in the wake of the 1704 legislation which excluded non Anglicans from public office with expensive leases. However, these migrants who came from Ireland to the USA before the Famine tried to distance themselves from those they called the "Famine Irish." Nicknamed the Scotch-Irish, because they were descendants of Presbyterians from Ulster, they tended to insist on their American heritage rather than on their Irish ancestry (Miller 156).

**9.** This is a comment made by the editors in the catalogue of Burns' Collection: "With horses of his own that race in the Curragh in County Clare [sic, Kildare?], Burns had a particular fondness for [*Knight of Tara*], demonstrating the keen reverence of the Irish for the horse." (Dalsimer II)

**10.** American Art Association (72). See also Homan Potterton (102-114) and Reid (4).

**11.** Todorov gives the example of the face of Geta, which was rubbed out of the Severan Tondo, a circular portrait of Septimius Severus' family (AD 200), because he was assassinated by Caracalla who, once in power, attempted to erase any trace of his late brother's existence.

**12.** "The nation [...] is an imagined political community [...] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 15)

**13.** I would like to thank Janell Snape (Bonham's, San Francisco) for her great help in finding a picture of the painting.

## ABSTRACTS

This article explores the ways in which 19th-century paintings collected by Americans of Irish descent complement the official celebrations aimed at commemorating the Irish diaspora in the United States. It shows how these paintings are usually selected by art collectors for their authenticity, a quality often associated with artworks conveying stereotypes about Irishness as well as some nostalgia for the homeland. By exhibiting such images, an individual presents his own vision of the past and this private form of remembrance is likely to participate in the construction of a cultural identity in the collective imagination, especially when the collector lends his paintings to a public gallery. Thus, these pictorial symbols of Irishness may move from the private to the public sphere, so that they can enhance the sense national identity deriving from a commemoration organised by the state.

Cet article montre comment les tableaux du dix-neuvième siècle collectionnés par certains Américains d'origine irlandaise complètent les cérémonies officielles visant à commémorer la diaspora irlandaise aux États-Unis. Il souligne que ces tableaux sont souvent sélectionnés par les collectionneurs pour leur authenticité, une qualité généralement associée aux peintures véhiculant des stéréotypes à propos de l'Irlandité ou une certaine nostalgie pour le pays d'origine. En exposant de telles images, un individu présente sa propre vision du passé et ce souvenir personnel tend à participer à la construction d'une identité culturelle dans l'imagination collective, en particulier lorsque le collectionneur prête ses peintures à une galerie publique. Ainsi, ces symboles picturaux de l'Irlandité passent du domaine privé à la sphère publique, de façon à mettre en valeur une définition de l'identité nationale qui se dégage habituellement des commémorations organisée par l'État.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** commémoration, peinture, Irlandité, souvenirs personnels et familiaux, communauté nationale, stéréotypes, nostalgie
**Keywords:** commemoration, painting, Irishness, private remembrance, national community, stereotypes, nostalgia

## AUTHOR

### AMELIE DOCHY

Maître de Conférences, Agrégée d'anglais, Phd. Irish Studies, 19th century, English Department, University of Toulouse II. Contact: amelie.dochy[at]univ-tlse2.fr